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Hanging On To the Tail Of a Bear

By Tom Wicker

If Adm. Stansfield Turner didn't know it when President Carter called him home from Europe to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency, he surely knows it now. He's got a bear by the tail, one that even the most bold and determined director probably can't control.

That was made clear by the disclosure in The Washington Post that the C.I.A., since 1957, secretly had paid millions of dollars—\$750,000 last year—to King Hussein of Jordan. Not only did these payments survive through five Administrations and into a sixth, but:

“They were labeled an ‘impropriety’ last year by President Ford’s Intelligence Oversight Board; Mr. Ford took no action and let the payments continue.”

Neither the C.I.A. nor Mr. Ford mentioned the Hussein payments to the Senate Intelligence Committee or to House and Senate special committees that recently investigated the intelligence community.

Neither Mr. Ford’s C.I.A. director, George Bush, nor Mr. Ford himself informed President-elect Carter of the Hussein payments, although Mr. Bush met with Mr. Carter five different times to brief him on the world situation and on the agency’s “sources and methods.”

Mr. Carter is reported by The Post to have stopped the payments when the newspaper’s investigation made him aware of them; and this has led to the criticism that, by halting them on the eve of Secretary of State Vance’s visit to Jordan, Mr. Carter has made it less likely that King Hussein can play a useful role in a Middle East peace settlement.

This criticism reflects the classic bureaucratic reaction (in this case, no

doubt the C.I.A.’s reaction) to disclosure of mistakes and improprieties—an attempt to shift the attack from those who committed the mistake or the impropriety to those who exposed it.

But that won’t wash. If, as the Intelligence Oversight Board reported, the payments were improper, they should have been discontinued last year, at the least. Mr. Carter should have been given timely information about them, so that he could perhaps have made a more timely decision on their discontinuation.

Aside from the impact on Middle East policy, moreover, the Hussein matter tells all too much about the C.I.A. and about the impossible task confronting Admiral Turner and Mr. Carter in trying to control a monster that operates in secrecy and arrogates to itself immunity from the restraints of law and policy.

It would be interesting to know, for example, whether the five Presidents who preceded Mr. Carter each knew in detail and approved specifically the continuing payments to King Hussein. Whatever rationale there might have been for clandestine payments to him in 1957, was it re-examined annually or even quadrennially?

Did the C.I.A. determine the necessity for these payments and persuade or deceive one Administration after another into going along? Or did one Administration after another decide as a matter of policy to make the payments, then merely use the C.I.A. as a secret bank? Who has been telling whom what ought to be done? And how many more little secrets like this one does the agency have to spring on Mr. Carter or on the Presidents who succeed him?

Congressional “oversight,” moreover, has been mocked again. Two long-term investigations failed to turn up information about the Hussein payments. The agency and the Ford Administration did not hesitate to withhold the information from Congress’s supposed watchdogs, although Aaron Donner, chief counsel for the House investigators, told The Post that the committee “went into the question of payments and other favors and gifts to heads of state sufficiently that . . . the failure to supply such information would be in the nature of withholding such information.”

Those who are defending the Hussein payments as necessary and effective have the burden, moreover, of explaining the 20 years of secrecy that surrounded them. If the payments were not bribes but reflected an honorable and fruitful relationship, they might better have been made and defended openly. Secrecy once exposed, as it might have been at any time, could only lend itself to any interpretation the worst enemies of Hussein and the United States wanted to put on the story.

No wonder, therefore, that one purpose of Mr. Carter’s current review of “sensitive foreign intelligence activities” is to assure that “what can be done openly is not done secretly.” But he can have no such assurance as long as he and Admiral Turner must hang on to the tail of a bear that obviously doesn’t want to be controlled. Isn’t it time to rid ourselves of the bear in favor of a pet that can be house-